

Series: Man on the Run: Jonah's Journey from Running Away to Running with God

Jonah Stumbling (When God Uses You...But Still Needs to Change You)

Jonah 4

Recently, I read a challenging article that described the three common reactions people have when the world around us feels crazy and divided. Some jump straight into the fray and start arguing, adding fuel to the fire of outrage. Some put their heads in the sand and try to ignore it all. And some simply decide to do some good—to be kind, to show grace, to shine light instead of adding to the darkness.

The article made a piercing observation: “Often, Christians aren’t providing an alternative to the anger and outrage online; they’re fueling it” (Carey Nieuwhof).

And, how many of you know, when Christians lose their minds, people lose their faith.

That same danger shows up in the final chapter of Jonah.

We’ve watched Jonah run from God, get pursued by God, and then run with God **in reluctant obedience** as an entire city repented. But now we come to the uncomfortable ending. Jonah stumbles. And in his stumbling we see both a warning and a challenge for every one of us.

Main Idea: Even when God uses us powerfully despite our flaws, unresolved pride, bitterness, or resentment toward “the other” can cause us to stumble, and can shipwreck our witness, until we let grace go deeper and evict what’s living rent-free in our hearts.

Let’s consider some truths about Jonah’s stumble that can help steady us and keep us from shipwrecking our witness.

1. God Uses Flawed Vessels

We begin by recalling what happened just before chapter 4: God Uses a flawed vessel. After Jonah finally obeyed and went to Nineveh, he reportedly preached one of the shortest sermons in history: “*Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!*” (Jonah 3:4). That was it. No fancy outline, no emotional appeal.

Yet the response was extraordinary. The people of Nineveh believed God (Jonah 3:5). They proclaimed a fast. From the greatest to the least, they put on sackcloth, a symbol of repentance. Even the king came down from his throne, covered himself with sackcloth, sat in ashes, and issued a decree that **everyone**, from the greatest to the least, should fast and cry out to God. Remarkably, he even included the animals in this dramatic demonstration of repentance (Jonah 3:5-8).

And God saw their repentance and relented from the disaster He had threatened (Jonah 3:10).

Here is the wonder of God’s grace: He used a flawed, reluctant, prejudiced prophet to spark **one of the greatest spiritual awakenings in the Old Testament**. The increase did not come from Jonah’s skill or love; it came from God’s mercy. This shows us that God can use anyone, even someone whose heart is not yet fully right, because the power and the harvest belongs to Him.

So, here’s the acid test for every church and every Christian: What are we really depending on? Our programs? Our gifted leaders? Our strategies? Or the sovereign mercy of a God who graciously specializes in using flawed vessels for His glory in answer to prayer?

This is both humbling and incredibly freeing. It means the success of our ministry, our church, and our personal witness does not ultimately depend on how polished or mature we are right now. It depends on the God who uses flawed people for His redemptive purposes — **because imperfect vessels are the only kind He’s got.**

2. God Tests the Vessel to Reveal the Leaks

But revival in Nineveh did not mean Jonah's heart was fully healed. The fact that God used Jonah despite his flaws does not mean God excused it, winked at it, or dismissed it. God was being gracious, merciful, and patient for the sake of those who were perishing and in need of repentance.

One of the main purposes of the book of Jonah is to demonstrate a core characteristic of God's nature, namely that He is "a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love..." (Jonah 4:2). But God's patience is never permission.

Our lack of character, especially our lack of love can shipwreck our witness and cause others to stumble. Even though God had used Jonah mightily, something was still living rent-free in his heart, namely a deep-seated pride, a sense of superiority, and a bitter resentment toward "the other"—toward the very people God had called him to warn. Chapter 4 shows us that **God tests the vessel to reveal the leaks** — leaks that not only threaten to shipwreck our faith but can also wound and cause others around us to stumble.

When God showed mercy to Nineveh, Jonah became furious. In his prayer, he admitted that he had fled to Tarshish because he knew God was "a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Jonah 4:2). Jonah was angry that God was gracious.

So, God appointed a plant to grow quickly and give Jonah shade from the sun. Jonah was exceedingly glad for the plant (Jonah 4:6). But then God appointed a worm to attack the plant so it withered. Then a scorching east wind and burning sun beat down on Jonah's head until he wanted to die (Jonah 4:7-8). In that moment of discomfort, Jonah's true heart spilled out. He was more concerned about the plant and his own comfort than about the 120,000 people in Nineveh who had just repented.

The test revealed the leak: a root of bitterness and self-righteousness still alive in Jonah's heart. Oh, it's easy to love people who love you. But do we love people when they're hard to love? That's the test. Jonah could spot the obvious idols of the pagans, but he was blind to

the more subtle idols in his own heart, namely his nationalistic pride and his resentment toward “the other.”

Are we any different? How often are we more concerned about our own personal comfort, our preferences, our schedule, or our emotional well-being than we are about knowing God deeply and accomplishing His redemptive purposes? We get upset when church gets messy, when ministry costs us time or convenience, or when God calls us to love people who inconvenience us or challenge our worldview.

Like Jonah, we can become far more passionate about protecting our little “shade plant” of comfort than about the thousands around us who are spiritually dying. The question God asked Jonah still speaks to us today: “Do you do well to be angry?” — or, maybe in our case, “Do you do well to stay comfortable?”

3. God Refines the Vessel to Keep It Sailing for Jesus

Now, God doesn’t just use flawed vessels, He refines them so they can keep sailing for Jesus instead of shipwrecking themselves or others.

Again, at the end of the chapter God asks Jonah a simple but penetrating question: “Do you do well to be angry?” (Jonah 4:9). But Jonah doubles down in his anger: “Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.” Then God uses the plant and the worm to drive the point home: “You pity the plant... And should not I pity Nineveh...?” (Jonah 4:10-11).

God is gently exposing the root still living rent-free in Jonah’s heart. When we say something, (like bitterness), is living rent-free, we mean it has taken up residence in your mind and heart without any spiritual benefit to you. On the contrary, it’s costing you. It occupies space, controls your emotions, and demands constant attention. It just keeps taking and taking. That was Jonah. The same root that caused him to run from God in chapter 1 now caused him to sulk in anger in chapter 4.

The writer of Hebrews gives us this sober warning: “*See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled*” (Hebrews 12:15).

At the root of Jonah’s problem was an idol in his heart.

Remember back in chapter two, when Jonah prayed from the belly of the fish, he declared, “*Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love*” (Jonah 2:8). For a brief moment Jonah saw a profound truth. But he never fully applied it to his own heart.

How can Jonah, or any of us, experience the fullness of God’s steadfast covenant love if we look to other things or other people to do for us what only God can? That’s idolatry. And idolatry will always rob us of what we can only find in God.

Remember the context: Jonah was a prophet during a time when the brutal Assyrian Empire, with its capital in Nineveh, was the greatest threat to Israel. The Assyrians were notorious for their cruelty. Jonah hated them with a passion. He wanted God to destroy Nineveh, not save it.

Keller put it this way: “Jonah’s love for his people and his patriotism, which were good things, had turned sour, into bigotry. As long as serving God fit into his goals for Israel, he was fine with God. But as soon as he had to choose between the true God and the god he actually worshipped, he turned on the true God in anger. His national identity had become more foundational to his self-worth than his role as a servant of the God of all nations. The real God had become just a means to an end. He was using God to serve his real god.

Race and nation are just two of an infinite number of good things that can become idols. **Whatever you live for actually owns you.**”

When God showed mercy to Nineveh, Israel’s enemy, Jonah’s world collapsed. That’s why he could say, “It is better for me to die than to live” (Jonah 4:3). **Because his idol had been struck, he felt he had nothing left to live for.**

We must hear this warning clearly in our own day. The same danger that ensnared Jonah can easily ensnare us.

Today, many professing Christians allow their allegiance to a political party, whether on the right or the left, to trump their loyalty to King Jesus and His kingdom agenda for the nations. We cheer when “our side” wins but we grow bitter or resentful when the other side wins. We treat them as the enemy rather than lost souls in need of a Savior. We treat certain political outcomes as ultimate, and suddenly the Great Commission feels secondary. We begin to use God to serve our real god.

But the gospel dismantles every idol. In Christ, our primary identity is no longer ‘conservative,’ ‘progressive,’ ‘American,’ or any other label — it is ‘a sinner saved by grace,’ a new creation and redeemed child of God. This received identity humbles us so we cannot feel superior to anyone, and it frees us to love the nations as God does.

King Jesus did not die only for people who vote like us. His kingdom agenda is for people from every tribe, tongue, and political persuasion.

Let us examine our hearts: Are we more passionate about our political side winning than about lost people, even those who oppose us, hearing the gospel? If so, an idol is living rent-free in our hearts and it will eventually cause us to stumble just as it did Jonah.

How can we be freed from these idols?

Beloved, as Tim Keller helps us to see, the only thing that truly releases us from the grip of idols is a heart grasp of the radical grace of God. Jonah caught a glimpse of this in the fish. For a moment he understood that salvation is of the Lord alone. No one deserves it, but we can all receive it by pure grace alone.

Had Jonah grasped this fully, it would have purged his self-righteousness and kept his disappointment from turning into despair.

Most of us are like Jonah. We need repeated exposures to both our desperate need for grace and the hope of the gospel. Getting God's love down into the deepest layer of our identity is a process and often a slow one.

Only through the grace of God, God's Riches at Christ's Expense, can we be freed from our idols. This grace cuts deep to the heart, yet it lifts us higher than the heavens. It grounds our happiness and identity in the unchanging love of the Father.

While we maintain all our other identifications, the most fundamental thing about us is that we are sinners saved by grace. In ourselves we are lost and undeserving, but in Christ we are completely accepted and delighted in by the One we adore most.

How can we feel superior to anyone if our standing before God is only by grace and we are absolutely assured of God's endless, unchanging love? That is the grace that can finally evict every idol and remake us into fishers of men whose hearts beat with compassion for the lost instead of resentment toward "the other."

Think about the parable of the prodigal son. Again, Jonah's story mirrors both sons in Jesus' parable. Like the younger son, Jonah ran away from the Father's call and ended up in the far country of disobedience. Like the elder brother, even while he was outwardly serving God and preaching in Nineveh, his heart stayed far from the Father's heart — angry, self-righteous, and resentful that grace was being shown to "the other" (the Ninevites he despised).

Yet the most beautiful and hopeful parallel is this: just as the father in the parable ran to his wayward son with open arms, compassion, and restoration before the son could even finish his speech, our heavenly Father runs after Jonah, and after us, with pursuing grace. He doesn't wait for us to clean ourselves up. He meets us in the storm, in the belly of the fish, and even in our angry sulking under the plant. God's relentless love is always running toward us.

Now it's important to note that the abrupt ending of Jonah also functions like the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15), where the story stops with the father's appeal to the older brother. The question hangs in the air: Will the elder brother (or Jonah) join the party of grace, or remain outside in resentment?

Brothers and sisters, the fifth chapter of Jonah is now ours to write with our own lives.

God wants to do more than remove the bad tenant of bitterness. He wants to remake us from the inside out by His grace so we become the fishers of men we are called to be—people whose hearts are filled with His compassion for the lost instead of resentment toward them.

Imagine what a "Chapter 5" of Jonah might have read if Jonah had allowed that grace to do its deepest work and his heart had become like the father who ran to the wayward son. Here's an imagined fifth chapter:

And Jonah rose early the next morning and returned to Nineveh. He no longer stood at a distance with folded arms. Instead, he ran into the city with the same compassion the Father had shown him. He embraced the king and the people, saying, "I was wrong to hate you. The God who pursued me in mercy now sends me to rejoice with you. Let us walk together in the grace we have received."

The people of Nineveh saw the change in Jonah's heart and glorified God even more. From that day forward, Jonah became more than a man in a fish, but a true fisher of men. He not only called them to turn from their evil ways, he stayed with them, teaching them to know the covenant God of Israel, the God who had shown them mercy, who runs after every runaway heart. And the word of the Lord spread far beyond Nineveh because a once-reluctant prophet had finally been remade in the image of the Father's running love.

Beloved, that is the kind of transformed life God is after, not just a vessel that no longer leaks, but a vessel that sails with joy toward the very people the old Jonah once ran from.

Conclusion

Church, as we prepare to partake of the Lord's table of grace, let's examine ourselves this morning: Are there idols in your heart that are robbing you of experiencing the fullness of God's love? Are you looking to a person, a political party, prosperity, or ethnic identity to give you what only God can? Is there anything in your life apart from God that, if you lost it, you would not be able to live a meaningful life? Whatever that may be is your functional god.

Like Jonah, is self-righteousness and pride in your heart keeping you from seeing the grace potential in others?

The pursuing grace of Jesus is ready to renew and restore you. Will you let Him evict what needs to go? Will you let grace go deeper so you can run with Him instead of stumbling?

God doesn't just want to eradicate the bad tenant of anger and bitterness from our hearts. He wants to put in our hearts a person or people to bring His message of hope—even the person or people you may have viewed as an enemy.

Think about it: the great fish that plunged Jonah into the depths, also arose and became the vehicle that brought him to his mission field. In the same way, Jesus — the greater Jonah — went down into death for our sin and rose again so that we could be sent on mission to the nations. The fish points us to the Great Commission.

So whose your Nineveh or Ninevite? Remember this simple but powerful acronym — **FISH**:

- Find someone God wants you to reach.
- Invest in their lives.
- Share your faith and your church.
- Help them grow and reproduce.

This is how we move from stumbling to sailing for Jesus — not just removing what's toxic, but replacing it with a burden for the lost.

If you have never repented and trusted Christ as Lord and Savior, or if you have been running from Him in some area of your life, today is the day to turn to Him. Repentance is not about cleaning yourself up first so God will accept you — that's impossible. True repentance is turning your back on sin as you turn your face toward Jesus, the One who has already paid your debt on the cross. He receives you exactly as you are, forgives you completely, and gives you His Spirit to live a new life.

May the grace that saved you also compel you and empower you to run with Jesus, pass the baton, and finish the race He set before you to the glory of His name.